

# Haines: Crisis & Communication

Disaster strikes a small community making communication key to emergency efforts



A series of landslides including one large landslide in Haines on 12/2/20 claimed multiple houses and left two people, David Simmons, age 30 of Haines and Janae Larson, age 23 of Haines, missing and presumed dead.

**By Gretchen Weiss-Brooks**

When rain in Southeast Alaska makes the news, it really must be bad. Southeast Alaska is no stranger to rain; it is home to the Tongass, a temperate rainforest. November and December 2020 storms brought disaster for communities in the area causing flooding, road damage, and landslides and on December 2 the weather sparked an extraordinary disaster for a relatively isolated town. In Haines, a small fishing community at the top of the panhandle, the landslides were small at first, but still alarming enough to activate Trooper Colin Nemec. As the sole Wildlife Trooper stationed in Haines, he knew he would be one of the first responders. He kicked into action and was on his way to help residents when he witnessed the big one—the large, 600-foot-wide, house-eating landslide that left two people missing and feared dead, and others cut off from their houses.

"I actually saw the slide happen," Trp. Nemec, in full storyteller mode, wrote in an email. "There were a few smaller slides that blocked residents down Lutak Road from getting to town, and I was going to assist those residents if they needed help. I had just parked my patrol truck at the harbor and then saw the slide on Mt. Riley. Needless to say, it was an unreal experience; not only because of the magnitude of the event and the weight of the next few days setting in, but the immediate and unhesitating reaction of community members. There were a few commercial fishermen on the dock; and after we got over the shock, they asked me what I needed them to do. I told them to get their boats going-- they would be transporting persons I brought offshore back to Haines. The harbormaster also got his skiff started and transported several people out of the area that was blocked off from town. We used the Nixle





**TOP LEFT: Trp. Nemec and his family. BOTTOM LEFT: A small vessel surveys the landslide from a safe distance. RIGHT: P/V Enforcer crew uses side-scan sonar to search the landslide.**

alert system to tell people what had happened and what to do: come to the beach and send a signal (light, flare, anything to get our attention). The ground rescue team was unable to get across the slide due to how unstable it was. First responders for this incident were not only police officers and firefighters, but also fishermen, harbormasters, construction workers, and teachers.”

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*– Trooper Colin Nemec*

As a newcomer to a small town, Trp. Nemec, who previously worked as a Wildland Firefighter in California before joining the trooper ranks, knew that getting to know the community quickly and making connections would be a critical part of his job. Troopers will be the first to tell you – communication is key to their jobs and to large disaster operations. Unfortunately, Trp. Nemec was not afforded much of an opportunity to meet the community as his

arrival in town coincided with COVID protocols getting put into place. “It’s been difficult getting to know people since getting here, but my wife and I are trying to make the best of it and doing what we can safely,” explained Trp. Nemec.

Doing what can be done safely is the priority for all responders during a crisis, even those that help or come from afar. Sgt. Nick Zito responded to Haines to help Trp. Nemec; he is based out of the Juneau Alaska State Trooper Post about 70 miles from Haines, as the crow flies. Lt. Paul Fussey, the Alaska State Troopers Search and Rescue Coordinator, pulls strings from Anchorage. In a Teams video meeting, Sgt. Zito and Lt. Fussey stay connected about current resource needs and discussed requirements for a large emergency operation such as the devastating landslide.

“The Troopers are unique; I’ve worked all over the state including places where resources are few and far between,” said Sgt. Zito. “Here in Southeast, we were lucky. About the time we were notified, the Coast Guard was also notified, so they immediately started a response from the air station in Sitka and from Juneau with their cutters. That was a fast response given the limited daylight.”

The important part, Sgt. Zito stresses, is knowing your resources and who you can depend on when tough situations arise. In the case of the Haines landslide, the Search and

Rescue (SAR) partner organizations, such as Capital City Fire and Rescue, Juneau Mountain Rescue, and SEADogs, were among the first to be notified and they all have long-standing experience working collaboratively during disasters. All were contacted while steady communication with the Haines Borough Police Department and the Haines Volunteer Fire Department was maintained.

Behind the scenes from Trooper Headquarters in Anchorage, Lt. Fussey coordinated with Alaska Wildlife Trooper Capt. Aaron Frenzel. At the time, Lt. Fussey didn't know if a command center was needed in Haines for the SAR teams or for housing. Capt. Frenzel solved that issue by canceling a mission that the P/V Enforcer was on. Capt. Frenzel directed the vessel to head to its home port of Juneau to pick up supplies before continuing to Haines. Once in Haines, the P/V Enforcer, with both civilian and commissioned staff onboard, turned into the Trooper SAR platform. If needed, the P/V Enforcer even had generator capabilities that could be used to provide power to key infrastructure in the community and homes.

During the initial response, the Troopers were able to focus and take the lead on the SAR component because of Lt. Fussey's strong relationship with the State's Emergency Operations Center (SEOC).

"We were able to eliminate some of the red tape in the case because it is a natural disaster with a SAR component," said Lt. Fussey. "We worked with SEOC and they were busy enough with all the other landslides, loss of power, and all the other flooding. The SEOC just told me to take over the SAR. That's when I started to work with Nick [Zito], other Trooper command staff, and then worked with the Army."

Coordinating with the SEOC, the Army was able to helicopter in geologists from the Division of Geophysical and Geotechnical Surveys (DGGS) and weather specialists. (Helicopters were necessary for transportation of responders between

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## P/V Enforcer



The Division of Alaska Wildlife Troopers is responsible for protecting 33,904 miles of coastline. The organization is also responsible for the preservation of the migratory fish resource, such as salmon, up to 200 miles off-shore of Alaska.

The patrol vessels Stimson, Enforcer, and Cama'i are manned by Boat Patrol Officers and Vessel Technicians. For the crews of these vital patrol vessels, family life comes in small doses. Patrols often last 30 to 45 days and account for as many as 120 days a year away from home.

- **The P/V Enforcer was built in 2004**
- **The P/V Enforcer runs 84' in length**
- **It is uniquely set up as being capable of working commercial crab and other pot gear**
- **It is additionally the only vessel in the Southeast able to serve as a remote platform for an on-site Emergency Command Center**
- **Its crew is responsible for providing enforcement and a remote field presence in commercial crab, IFQ fisheries, sable fish, salmon, ground fish, herring, and fall/winter game patrols**



**K9-Tango and Handler Geoff Larson get a ride to the Haines landslide site from the P/V Enforcer.**





**TOP LEFT:** Joe Oesterling from Haines and KgHera get a ride to shore from the P/V Enforcer. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Kg Tillie surveys the slide area. **RIGHT:** View of the landslide area. A house can be seen on the right for size comparison.

Juneau and Haines because the airport was cut off from the community by a landslide.) The response of the Alaska Dive and Rescue Team, who joined on standby just in case something of interest was found in the water, were also brought in. The dive team did eventually assist by looking through the side-scan sonar to help identify anything they could possibly dive on.

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*- Sgt. Nick Zito*

Multiple days after the large landslide, Haines was inundated with volunteers, donated goods, and offers of assistance. Communication was again of great importance and Pat Dryer, with Alaska Center Management Team, responded to the community as an incident commander to

assist Haines EOC with any incident command they may have needed. By the time Dryer arrived, Haines EOC had taken the lead for managing everything while the SEOC worked to back them up.

Sgt. Zito shifted to EOC Haines Borough Police support and continued to take the lead on the SAR efforts for the two missing individuals, as well as continued trooper support for the Haines Police.

“Nick has been taking time away from his family by being in Haines, working many hours, coordinating everything for us,” praised Lt. Fussey. “Nick right now is the eyes and ears for command staff. He is feeding us what [Haines] EOC needs there so we can get in contact with the State EOC. Nick is doing the bulk of the work there.”

“I’m Mr. Logistics,” clarified Lt. Fussey. “The people in the field, like Nick and Colin, do all the work. I’ll make it happen. I’ll get what they need to the best of my abilities—that’s what I do.”

Sgt. Zito also chimed in with appreciation for the work of others.

“This is what we get paid to do, this is what we do, it’s what we’re trained to do,” Sgt. Zito explained. “A lot of these other folks are dropping their personal lives, dropping

work, and coming out and giving it their all. I'm always super appreciative of that."

So, what is the key elements to an emergency response in Alaska? Sgt. Zito and Lt. Fussey reiterated that what was done well and were key elements were quality communication and great community relationships.

"Knowing the resources in your area, establishing those relationships, and maintaining those relationships," said Sgt. Zito.

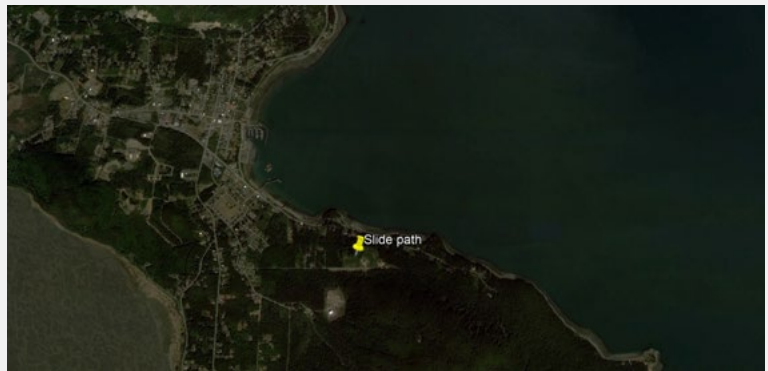
**"Networking, networking, networking – so when you call them you know each other and they're willing to drop everything to help each other out. That's a big thing. It's a large state but a small community, especially a small disaster response community."**

*-Lt. Paul Fussey*

Lt. Fussey echoed Sgt. Zito's sentiments, "networking, networking, networking – so when you call them you know each other and they're willing to drop everything to help each other out. That's a big thing. It's a large state but a small community, especially a small disaster response community."

Communication, from the state level to local, is the undercurrent that brings us all together. Even something like how Trp. Nemec did what he could to interact with his new community, as much as COVID allowed, right from the start of being stationed there is crucial to emergency response efforts. His efforts made it so the people on the dock the day of the landslide would trust him with organizing their efforts. Relationships the Troopers build on at all levels are what matters in our small-town state.

## Missing



**Map of the location of the landslide. The ocean element of this landslide made it unique.**

Jenae Larson, 23, and David Simmons, 30, are missing and believed to have died after the 600-foot-wide landslide destroyed Simmons' home where Larson also lived.

Larson graduated from Haines High School in 2016 and had recently returned home after graduating from University of Idaho to teach Kindergarten. She rented the apartment above Simmons' garage.

Simmons, a former Fulbright scholar with a Master of Science in international business studies, was known for wearing lederhosen around town. He was hired as the new executive director of the Haines Economic Development Corporation in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic and quickly got to work helping locals apply for relief funding.



**A piece of window framing from a house floats in the ocean at the edge of the landslide.**